NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A Turn of the Century Man and His Account Book.
By the Honorable Eunice Ross.

A slice of Western Pennsylvania history is reflected in the life and account book of Isaac Alexander Latshaw. An architect-builder born April 28, 1864, Latshaw kept a detailed record of his financial dealings from 1888 through September 1912. Latshaw himself represented an amalgamation of the three principal groups that settled colonial Pennsylvania: the Welsh Quaker, the Scotch-Irish Presbyterian and the Pennsylvania German, in this last case Mennonite. His antecedents had earlier settled in Eastern Pennsylvania and moved west and north after the Revolutionary War.

Latshaw was born in Scrubgrass Township, Venango County, Pennsylvania, where his mother, Martha Jane, had been born to Margaret Clay and William Jamison. The Clays (formerly Welsh Quakers) and the Jamisons (Scotch-Irish Presbyterian) had come to northwest Pennsylvania after the Revolutionary War, the Clays after a stop in Westmoreland County, the Jamisons from Lancaster County. Isaac's father, Henry John Latshaw, descended from an old Swiss Mennonite family that first settled in Berks County in 1728. Isaac's Mennonite great-grandparents, Nancy Ziegler and John Moyer Latschar, left Hereford Township, Berks County, in the winter of 1829-1830, to join her Ziegler father and uncle, who in 1815 had purchased Harmony, Pennsylvania, from Father George Rapp and his Harmonist Society. The Latschars, after successful farming in Butler County, moved in mid-century to Venango County where John and Nancy (now called Latchaw) gave each of their nine sons a farm in Irwin Township and each of their three daughters a town lot in the newly created hamlet of Barkleyville. Their grandson, Henry John, Isaac's father, spoke English and Pennsylvania Dutch. Literate in German only, he learned from his wife to read English.

Isaac's early childhood was spent on his parents' farm but even then he was restless, and in his teen years mirrored the national urge to move westward. At 14, he joined the vanguard of Pennsylvanians who pushed into the fertile prairie of the midwest. He built the hoops

---

Eunice Ross is a Judge in the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, Orphan's Court Division.
for a Conestoga wagon being constructed for his aunt and uncle, Sarah Latshaw and Robert McQuiston. He ran away with them in their covered wagon to Kansas. There Isaac homesteaded a sod house, worked as a cowboy, acted as a drummer for a railroad hotel, rode into Oklahoma in the great land rush when that territory was opened up to settlers and saw the great Apache chief Geronimo with fourteen of his companions after their capture.

Isaac's account book begins about this time with a June 1888 entry noting the receipt of $72 in cash from his father on a substantial debt owed by him to Isaac. The debt was not paid off until his father's death.¹

By 1890, Isaac, along with other disappointed Kansas pioneers, had returned to Venango County. For most of the next sixteen years, he designed and built many western Pennsylvania barns, houses, churches and buildings. Detailed entries begin in his brown-covered account book, a leather-tipped volume measuring 12½" by 8" by 1" and containing 258 pages. Many notations go beyond date and amount and include comprehensive information about the nature of the small building industry and Pennsylvania life at the turn of the century.

The business receipts begin with dying days of the western Pennsylvania oil boom when Isaac was building oil rigs or putting rafts together to ship merchandise or lumber down the Allegheny River. Venango County in the 1890s was a center of the oil industry. In 1890 and 1891 Isaac constructed several oil rigs for his father² and others.

The book reflects a rural economic system in the 1890s of partial barter and partial cash. In 1896, Latshaw built a smokehouse for Jonah Jacobs and was paid off in flour, lard and beans.³ The notations continue for William Griffin, who made partial payment with 20 gallons of cider,⁴ and William Carnahan.⁵ Carnahan sold building materials and Henry Latshaw, who was a builder as well as a farmer, had a running account with him.⁶ Isaac bought lumber from Carnahan.⁷

---

1 Isaac Latshaw account book, 258.
2 Ibid., 161, 163.
3 Ibid., 7.
4 Ibid., 9; 1891, 1892.
5 Ibid., 15, 16; 1892.
6 Ibid., 9.
7 Ibid., 16.
In 1893, Isaac built timber rafts for R. R. Leslie, George Leslie and G. R. Leslie to float lumber and produce down the Allegheny River. He also built a house for Jacob Jacobs. For Mrs. G. F. Leslie, he demolished and rebuilt a barn for which he was paid $340.76 in cash, 4 pounds of honey and four sacks of flour.

The prosperity of rural Western Pennsylvania now shows through entries relating to house embellishments, bright roofs, rambling verandas, fantastically turned Victorian spindles or moulding and other products of the jig-saw. Lewis McBride acquired two new verandas. A flurry of slate roofs, brilliant black or sea green, were installed for cousin Thomas Jolley and other families. John Blair not only got a new roof but also crown moulding, quarter round, a new ceiling, flooring and spindles.

M. D. McMichaels of Farmington, Pennsylvania, in 1895 had a sea green roof put on his house and added a veranda, dormer windows, posts and spindles. James McKinley contracted for a new roof for which he paid in cash, buckwheat and potatoes. Harvey Bell paid for two slate mantles but failed to pay for his tin gutters and paint.

Pittsburgh was then burgeoning into a major industrial center. Excess population spilled out of northwestern Pennsylvania again but not westward. This time the drive was south to the glass, iron, steel and aluminum works of Westmoreland and Allegheny counties, to the Pitcairn railroad shops, to the Westinghouse plants in eastern Allegheny County and the mills along the Monongahela River. Housing was acutely needed for the new working and management classes and Isaac Latshaw shifted his construction work south and into big projects.

Dr. X. O. Wender, who may have lived near Edgecliff, Westmoreland County, where the freight charge was paid, contracted with Isaac for the construction of six houses. They contained fancy cupboards, water closets, a coal house, finished attics, lumber walks and cisterns.

8 Ibid., 21.
9 Ibid., 22.
11 Ibid., 31; 1894.
12 Ibid., 29.
13 Ibid., 32; 1894.
14 Ibid., 36; 1894.
15 Ibid., 38; 1894.
16 Ibid., 48.
17 Ibid., 50; 1895.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 53, 55-57; probably 1895 and 1896, after Isaac’s marriage.
sophisticated living quarters for former farmers used to hand pumps and outside sanitary facilities. Edgecliff was the site of Isaac's first home after he married.

Isaac was married to Nola Belle Kelly on October 10, 1895. He met her when building a new show-place home for her family in Washington Township, Butler County, Pennsylvania. This contract was not carried in the account book. But in 1896, Isaac made a claim for the unpaid balance against the estate of Nola's father, Richard Kelly, who died July 30, 1895, while a county commissioner of Butler County. The married pair moved from Edgecliff to East McKeesport in Allegheny County in September 1898, and finally in October 1904 to Swissvale, a suburb of Pittsburgh.

In East McKeesport, Isaac constructed houses for a large land development by Dr. Parker Thompson. This project included, among other jobs, work on homes, the Victory Hotel and a printing office. Isaac contracted typhoid fever from polluted East McKeesport water and barely recovered.

As the housing shortage eased, Latshaw turned his attention to the needs of the big transportation and industrial corporations. From a small independent builder, Isaac now became economically tied to contracts with huge corporations.

About February 8, 1900, Isaac notes he was building cars for the Pennsylvania Railroad. In April 1900, he did a week’s construction job for Westinghouse Air Brake Company but returned to railroad work in 1901 when he was building cabinet shops and lumber sheds.

Disbursement items are scattered willy-nilly throughout the book. They are a hodge-podge of items for which any western Pennsylvania resident of the late Victorian age could have paid. Starting in Venango County, the account book shows that from 1892 to 1895 Isaac paid off his own, his father’s, and brother Samuel’s debts with William Carnahan and purchased items such as railroad tickets to Pittsburgh or Braeburn or Emlenton or Rockland or Clearlin. He also bought gum stays, locks, hinges, window sashes, oilcloth, hooks, overalls, one teakettle, a handsaw, a square, a padlock, an axe with handle, ear-

20 Ibid., 59-60; 1899.
21 Mabel Latshaw Hampshire, daughter of Isaac, letter to author Dec. 11, 1978. She wrote that the family had moved to East McKeesport in 1899 “and soon after Papa was seriously ill with typhoid fever. Water there caused several cases.”
23 Ibid., 62.
muffs, silk handkerchiefs, suspenders, cologne, candy and sarsparilla. He also paid realty taxes. There were items of cloth for a lined dress, threads, buttons and ladies' shoes.\(^\text{25}\)

In 1894, Latshaw notes it cost 13\(\dollar\) for a street car and bridge toll, 54\(\dollar\) for a ferry ride, lodging and breakfast 70\(\dollar\), lunch 10\(\dollar\), dinner 25\(\dollar\), medicine $2 and hire of a horse and buggy, $16. Also noted were railroad tickets to Franklin, Pennsylvania, Ravenna and Jefferson, Ohio, and farm taxes of $18.98.\(^\text{26}\)

In 1895, he spent $12 for a suit and $2.50 for shoes while buying his sister Ada a coat, stockings and a cap and his mother a hood and cape. Meat at that time cost 62\(\dollar\), oil 10\(\dollar\) and baking powder 10\(\dollar\).\(^\text{27}\)

After Isaac moved to the Pittsburgh area, the scattered disbursement items cease except for notations relating his wife's brother's debts. His brother-in-law, Marcus Weldin Kelly, had come to live with him in 1908, before moving to California. Isaac paid off his debts to an insurance company and others.\(^\text{28}\)

The disbursement items end in 1908 and the receipt items in 1912, but Isaac never ceased his designing and building. When the automobile became common, he built rental garages to house the vehicles. When his daughter was married after World War I, he gave her a lot from his large Swissvale property and constructed a charming bungalow for her and her groom. He left no record of this other than the house itself. In the 1930s, he designed and built an art deco triplex on other land owned by him in Swissvale. These transactions do not appear in the account book, which began twelve years before the old century ended and ended twelve years after the new century began.

Isaac, born during the Civil War, died two months before the United States entered World War II. His life and account book reflected the transformation of Western Pennsylvania from a rural economy dependent on barter, farming, lumbering and oil to an urban cash society reliant upon industrial production.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 166, 219-20, 242, 243, 249, 252; 1893-1895.
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 201.
\(^{27}\) Ibid., 178-81.
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 169.